

Preservice and in-service teacher education: A leadership model for collaborative learning



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Abstract

Innovative collaboration between schools and universities can enhance teacher education. The model described in this paper was developed as part of a partnership between a school principal leading a cluster of diverse primary schools and a local university school of teacher education. The partnership established a memorandum of understanding to support targeted and standards-based professional learning for teachers and new leaders across the schools in the cluster. Novice preservice teachers were also assigned to these schools for an extended weekly professional placement. This paper outlines the model as it was designed—to respond to the strategic demands of particular school communities, and to ensure teaching and leadership development for preservice and in-service teachers. The paper will explain the model's conceptual and research base for professional learning. It will identify practical theories for skill and leadership development in preservice and in-service teacher education.

¹ I acknowledge here the intellectual and organisational contribution of the other members of the project team, Colleen Alchin (New South Wales Department of Education and Communities) and Dr Marilyn Pietsch (Charles Sturt University).

Introduction: Teacher education as an ongoing process

While concern with practice has always received significant attention in initial teacher education, most current approaches are structured within a conventional grammar of teacher education that separates teaching practice from the academic curriculum. In most Australian teacher education courses, preservice teachers practise their developing teaching skills, reflect on their practice and work to refine their skills with support and feedback from their school-based teacher educators (SBTEs) on school placements. However, the structure of these arrangements means that this practice teaching is almost always assessed as performance against professional teaching standards (Reid, 2011). This, in turn, means that most 'student' teachers have little opportunity to actually study teaching or practise key teaching skills before they enter the classroom. They therefore struggle to be teaching-ready in three main ways:

1. They often do not get explicit instruction and coaching to improve their technical performance in core practices of teaching.
2. They do not often get to participate in professional discussions that consider the rationale for and effects of the particular techniques they are learning to use.
3. They have not worked alongside other teachers as colleagues in attempting to find new or better approaches to teaching particular things to particular children in particular classrooms.

The idea of a collaborative model for in-service and preservice teacher education is designed to address

these limitations and provide some of this experience. It also implies that initial teacher education is just the first step on a professional journey, not an end point in itself. Here in Australia, we are increasingly starting to think about the sort of teacher education that will provide teachers with the agility and responsiveness to social change that is necessary if they are to experience success as they enter the classroom. We know that early success is essential if teachers are to continue their professional journeys (Mayer et al., 2017). The emergence of teaching schools and the provision of funding for schools' participation in teacher education partnerships support this thinking. In this paper, I ask whether teacher education and school partnerships in which school leaders assist their staff to see themselves as practitioners who are continuously learning how to get better at teaching may be of interest to the profession. I explore a particular school-university partnership that aimed to address teacher learning in regard to the immediate problems of practice that emerge in the day-to-day life of schools. Reflecting on my own experience with this partnership, I also highlight some of the key issues that need to be addressed for such approaches to succeed.

Teacher education as the study of practice

The Initial and Continuing Teacher Learning Partnership (ICTLP) was based on a belief in the merit of conceptualising teacher education as a continuing process. Beginning with initial teacher education, this process proceeds from a transitional move into the profession to a continuing spiral of professional growth, as depicted in Figure 1.

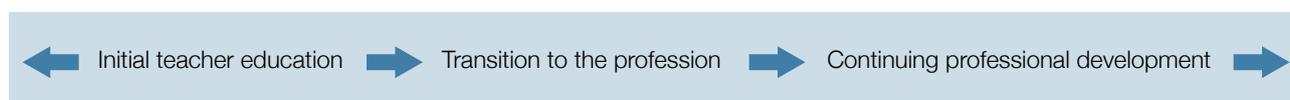


Figure 1 Model of teacher development and change over time

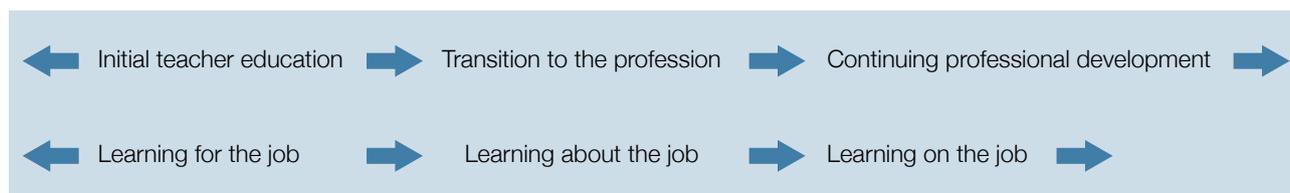


Figure 2 Model of collaborative teacher education partnership, including teacher development and professional learning over time

This is a well-accepted model of teacher development and change over time. It is important to recognise that novice teachers enter university with existing knowledge, skills, attitudes and experiences, and that even the most experienced teacher never knows it all—particularly as social and technological changes impact so deeply on students, schools and teaching.

The ICTLP project team based our thinking for the partnership on the ideas of Stanford Professor Pam Grossman, who has consistently aimed to understand and demystify the growth of knowledge in teaching (see, for example, Grossman, Hammerness & McDonald, 2009). Her research has focused not only on what, why, when and in what order a teacher should teach her students but also on how best to teach particular concepts and skills for different learners. She sees these as real problems that teachers are interested in solving. This suggests an expanded view of practical knowledge that goes beyond the limitations of a theory–practice dualism and actually connects current approaches to reflective practice in teacher education with the historical apprenticeship and training models of initial teacher education that were previously dominant. In contrast with other approaches that operate along these lines—such as Teach for Australia and the school-centred initial teacher training models operating in England—however, our thinking accepts that here in Australia we cannot afford either an elite approach to initial teacher education or a series of decentralised local systems.

For this reason, initial teacher education will most probably remain situated in the university setting, where new teachers are provided with the opportunity to gain knowledge that extends their personal intellectual capacities and ensures that what they can teach is both appropriate and rigorous. But this sort of knowledge is not enough. A collaborative teacher education partnership model means that as well as educating new teachers *for* the job of teaching, initial teacher education must also give them the opportunity to learn *about* the job as they engage with other professionals who are continuing to learn *on* the job—as depicted in Figure 2.

Leadership for improving learning

Our aim for the ICTLP was for preservice teachers, teachers and their school leaders to operate as a real community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As members of the cluster community, we would all benefit from working together to interrogate the effects and implications of policy and theory in relation to these particular schools. We aimed to focus on authentic problems of practice that frequently arise for schools as they struggle to achieve high education outcomes for the students and communities they serve. The key objective for the cluster leaders was to improve the learning outcomes of all students in the cluster schools.

In addition, the cluster leaders, aspiring leaders, teachers and preservice teachers would also gain clear benefits.

Principals and assistant principals

The principals of the cluster schools would be leaders of the work in their own settings, and they would share the leadership of the whole cluster focus by each performing that role once over the course of the year. As such, they would be able to amass and collect evidence of leading their schools to achieve regional and state priority outcomes; of effective peer and colleague development and support; and of meeting the short-term objectives of their school improvement plans.

Teachers

As members of ICTLP, the teachers in each of the schools would be able to meet their own professional development requirements for the maintenance of professional accreditation by participating in the community over the year. They would gain evidence of their own leadership capacities through their work with the preservice teachers in their stage teams; extend their own repertoires of practice by taking up the initiatives designed for the cluster; and work to enhance learning in their own classrooms.

Preservice teachers

We wanted to give the preservice teachers an opportunity to observe and participate in teaching as intellectual work, where they had to make explicit connections between observed practice, the policies that were driving the need to change practice, and the theoretical ideas that inform policies. We wanted them to see that teaching is work that needs to be studied and practised if it is to be learned. And we wanted them to see how more experienced teachers were demonstrating higher levels of proficiency and leadership in their workplaces in terms of the standards issued by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2011).

Our hope was that both the preservice teachers and the school teaching staff would come to see the value of continuing to study their teaching as an ongoing means of refining and extending professional expertise over time, and that they would gather evidence that allowed them to demonstrate this.

A case for consideration

In many ways, we were thinking big. Each school agreed to welcome and allocate at least one pair of preservice teachers to each stage level (Early Stage 1 to Stage 1; Stage 2; and Stage 3) for their initial weekly 'introduction to teaching' professional placement.

The initial stages of the partnership involved the allocation of a group of 6–12 first-year preservice teachers to each of the nine cluster schools. At minimum, each school was allocated a pair of preservice teachers at each stage, and the two larger schools had two pairs per stage. This meant that 66 preservice teachers were at the disposal of the cluster for a day a week over approximately 24 weeks across the year—a minimum of six and a maximum of 12 preservice teachers per school. This scale allowed for adequate university-based teacher educator (UBTE) participation and involved from three to six SBTEs in each school—33 across the cluster.

Leadership at all levels

Preservice teachers would always be placed in pairs and groups with a number of SBTEs so that both new and already competent or proficient teachers could reflect on their professional learning together. SBTEs and UBTEs planned the program of professional learning together. Over the 24 weekly preservice teacher visits to the schools, four different focuses were designed in alignment with annual planning for the schools. The learning community worked at four levels: classroom, school, cluster and university. At the university level, preservice teachers and their UBTEs formed a sub-community for on-campus activity.

As a group, the cluster schools planned to focus on one shared concern at a time. The pilot stage of the partnership took place in March and April, and the focus during this time was on ‘closing the gap’ for the large proportion of Aboriginal children in their communities. The relevance of this theme for initial teacher education is clear, and it provided an authentic pivot around which preservice teachers could integrate their encounters with theoretical concepts related to Indigenous cultures and histories in curriculum, sociology, learning and developmental studies as they progressed through their course.

As a key means of connecting with community, the cluster decided to introduce an Aboriginal language program across all schools, with cluster funding to resource a local Aboriginal language teacher to ‘teach the teachers’ as part of their mandatory professional development hours for the maintenance of their professional accreditation. To demonstrate their own professional accomplishment and leadership, one teacher in each school would take on the work of coordinating and organising the weekly introductory

language lesson, held over six weeks through interactive video-conferencing across the whole cluster after school on the day of the preservice teachers’ placement. The language lesson would then be taught to all classes in the schools during the following week, with the preservice teachers having the opportunity to reteach the lesson as revision on their next visit. Part of the program was the development of a shared lesson plan and follow-up activities at stage level for use during the week between sessions. These were discussed at each of the four levels of the learning community at different times.

The remaining ICTLP focuses were quite different, reflecting both departmental and local priorities. The second cluster focus was on health and physical activity, leading up to the cluster’s athletics carnival. The third shared focus was on local history, and the fourth was on public speaking and debating.

Reflection on the process suggested that the outcomes for the members of the ICTLP would be different according to their role in the school, the cluster and their career goals. The nature of these outcomes for each group, and our reflection on the issues raised in the operation of this partnership, will be discussed in the presentation at the Research Conference 2017 of the Australian Council for Educational Research.

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